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ABSTRACT

This study investigated California teachers' attitudes about National Board certification. Data came from focus groups with and a 2001 survey of National Board certified teachers. Overall, teachers believed that the certification process made them better teachers and that it boosted their self-confidence. Most considered it excellent or good professional development. Elementary teachers and women saw more utility to the certification process than did high school teachers or men. Teachers felt that they benefitted from the certification more than their schools or districts did. Female teachers were more likely to be motivated by the personal challenge of becoming certified and by having increased capacity to help their students reach academic content standards than were male teachers. Teachers in poor, urban, and low-performing schools were considerably more likely to be motivated by increased compensation than were teachers in predominantly white, higher-performing, suburban schools. Teachers' perceived outcomes from the certification included personal challenge and strengthening their teaching. A majority of teachers were already serving in leadership roles before they obtained National Board certification and saw the certification as enhancing their leadership abilities. All respondents were aware of the financial incentives they could receive if they taught in low-performing schools. (SM)

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California Teachers' Perceptions of National Board Certification

Individual Benefits Substantial, System Benefits Yet To Be Realized

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

Research Conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart

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California Teachers' Perceptions of National Board Certification

Individual Benefits Substantial, System Benefits Yet To Be Realized

California has set rigorous standards for all of its students, but the gap between those high standards and low levels of student performance has become uncomfortably apparent. Far too few students, particularly poor and minority students, are reaching the standards.

In the past few years, state policymakers have directed considerable resources toward bolstering California's teaching force. Their belief, backed up by research, public opinion and common sense, is that the best way to improve student achievement is to increase the knowledge and skills of teachers.

The state has increased salaries for teachers, put more money into professional development for teachers, provided more mentoring help for new teachers, recruited more teachers into the profession and worked to improve the schools that teach prospective teachers. The state has applied dollars in the form of incentives to get accomplished teachers to work in those schools where student performance is lowest.

And, like many states, California is investing in increasing the number of teachers who become certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Over the past decade, this certification increasingly has come to define what it means to be a master teacher in the United States.

An extensive new survey of California teachers who are certified by the National Board gives us an indication of the early return on that investment. The survey was conducted during summer 2001 by Belden Russonello & Stewart, a public opinion research firm that has done extensive work on issues of education and teaching nationally and in California. This summary report, along with our other

What's Involved?

The certification process involves a rigorous, two-part assessment:

- a portfolio of videotaped classroom teaching, lesson plans and student work samples showing the teacher's impact on student learning; and
- a written assessment evaluating knowledge of subject area content, classroom practices, curriculum design and student learning.

Assembling the portfolio takes most of the school year — and up to about 200 hours. In addition, candidates often begin preparing for the process — studying the standards and reflecting on their teaching — the summer before they officially begin.

"The certification process makes you constantly aware of what you're doing in the classroom and constantly aware of whether you have accomplished teaching or not."

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In this brief summary, we offer key findings and a set of recommendations for policymakers. We believe there are significant policy implications because:

- Teachers report that the process of becoming certified by the National Board is outstanding professional development. It causes them to look carefully at how they teach, deepens their knowledge and expands their horizons. The California teachers who have been certified by the National Board feel overwhelmingly positive about their personal growth. Many teachers report improvements in their pedagogical practice, including developing curriculum, articulating learning goals and using student assessments. Policymakers may want to consider the use of sustained professional development with a clear focus on students and their learning as the model for all professional development for teachers.
- The benefits to California's education system as a whole are not yet as readily apparent as the benefits to the teachers themselves. Teachers who have obtained National Board certification do not yet see their personal growth translating into benefits for their colleagues, schools or school districts. They believe their own students are benefiting, but they are much less likely to believe great benefits are accruing to the rest of the school community.
- Most teachers who have become certified by the National Board are mature teachers — seven in 10 are over the age of 40 — and they are motivated to become certified primarily because the process offers personal challenge. The younger teachers who seek National Board certification also are motivated by the personal challenge, but they are more motivated than their older colleagues by the monetary rewards and career advancement opportunities that accompany certification.
- Teachers do not pursue National Board certification to become education leaders. While most already held leadership roles, such as being mentors, before being certified, few have taken on additional leadership roles since then.

Personal Challenges and Outcomes

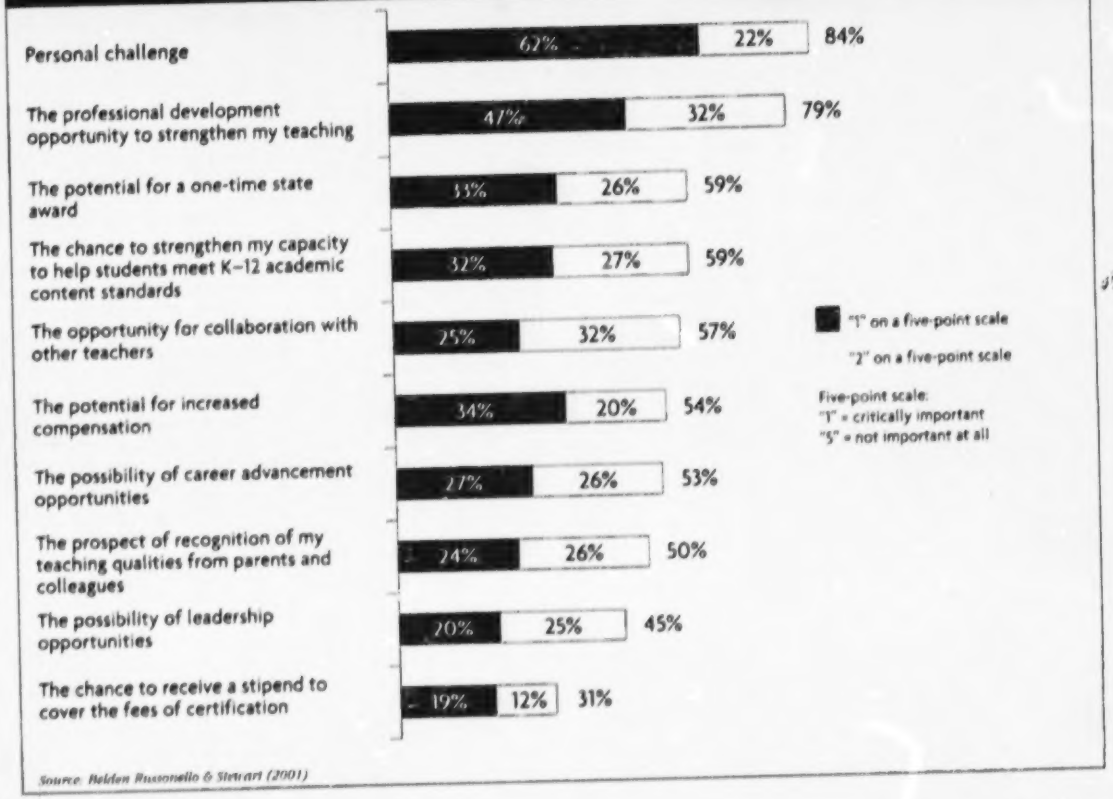
Motivations

Becoming certified by the National Board is a time-consuming and rigorous process (see box on p. 1). It is not to be entered into lightly.

We wanted to learn what motivates California teachers to become certified by the National Board and how that compares to the outcomes of the process. We found that the most significant motivations are the personal challenge and the opportunity to strengthen their own teaching. Considerably less significant are motivators such as recognition by their peers or the opportunity for leadership.

Chart 1 shows a ranking of 10 potential factors that caused teachers to pursue certification. Within this ranking of motivations are differences worth noting. Female teachers who are certified by the National Board are significantly more likely to be motivated by the personal challenge than their male counterparts are, and the men are more likely than the women to be motivated by financial rewards. Similarly, women are more likely to be motivated by having increased capacity to help their students reach California's academic content standards than men are. Teachers in poor, urban and low-performing schools are considerably more likely to be motivated by increased compensation than those who work in predominately white, higher-performing, suburban schools.

Chart 1
Motivations for Becoming Certified by the National Board



Source: Belden Russonello & Stewart (2001)

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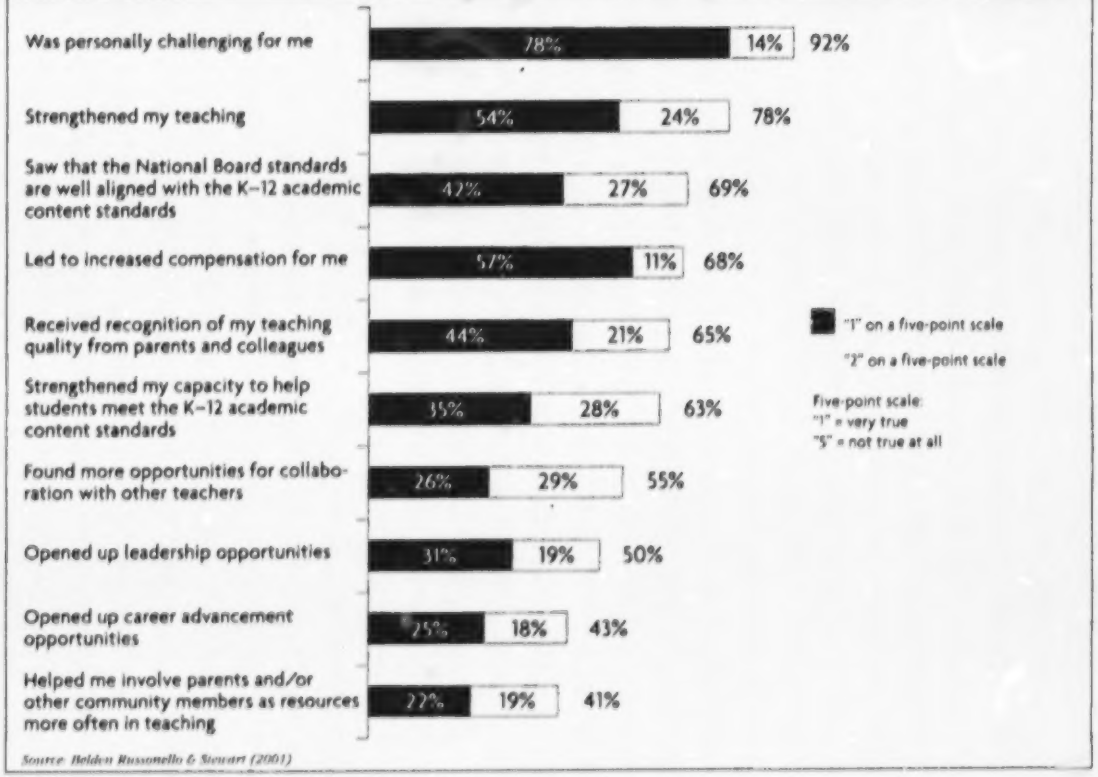
Outcomes

Beyond their motivations for becoming certified by the National Board, we also learned teachers' perceptions of the outcomes, and the results are quite similar.

Chart 2 shows a ranking of perceived outcomes from obtaining National Board certification. Again, we see that the personal challenge and strengthening teaching overwhelmingly top the list and that outcomes, such as providing additional leadership or career opportunities or involving parents or the community, are at the bottom.

Here, too, there are differences among the teachers certified by the National Board. For example, women are more likely than men to find the National Board's content standards aligned with the California academic standards, and they are more likely to say that the process strengthened their capacity to help their students meet California standards. Elementary teachers are more likely to see this additional capacity than are high school teachers or mathematics or science teachers.

Chart 2
Perceived Outcomes of National Board Certification



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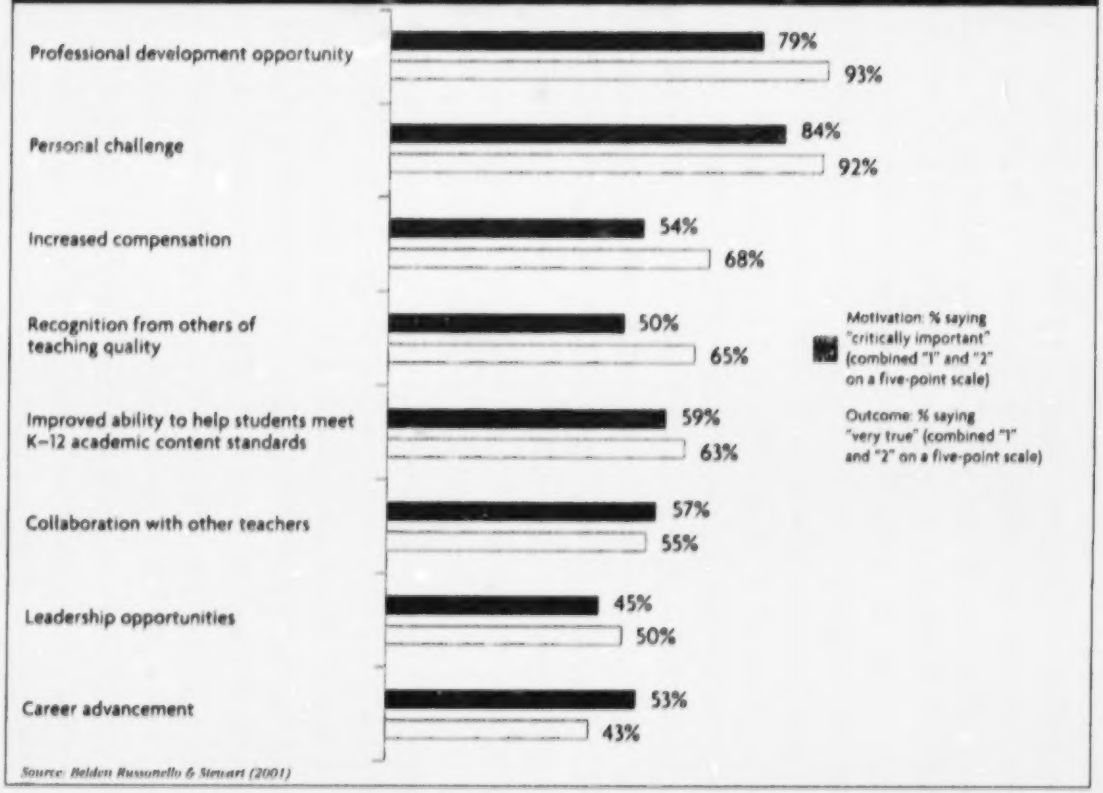
Outcomes vs. Motivations

When teachers' motivations to become certified by the National Board are compared with what they see as the outcomes, we find a nearly identical result. Chart 3 compares motivations and outcomes.

This consistent tracking between what motivates teachers to become certified by the National Board and their perceptions of the process is an indication that certification delivered what they wanted. They are largely happy with the program.

Chart 3
Comparison between Motivations and Perceived Outcomes



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Benefits: Personal and Professional

Utility

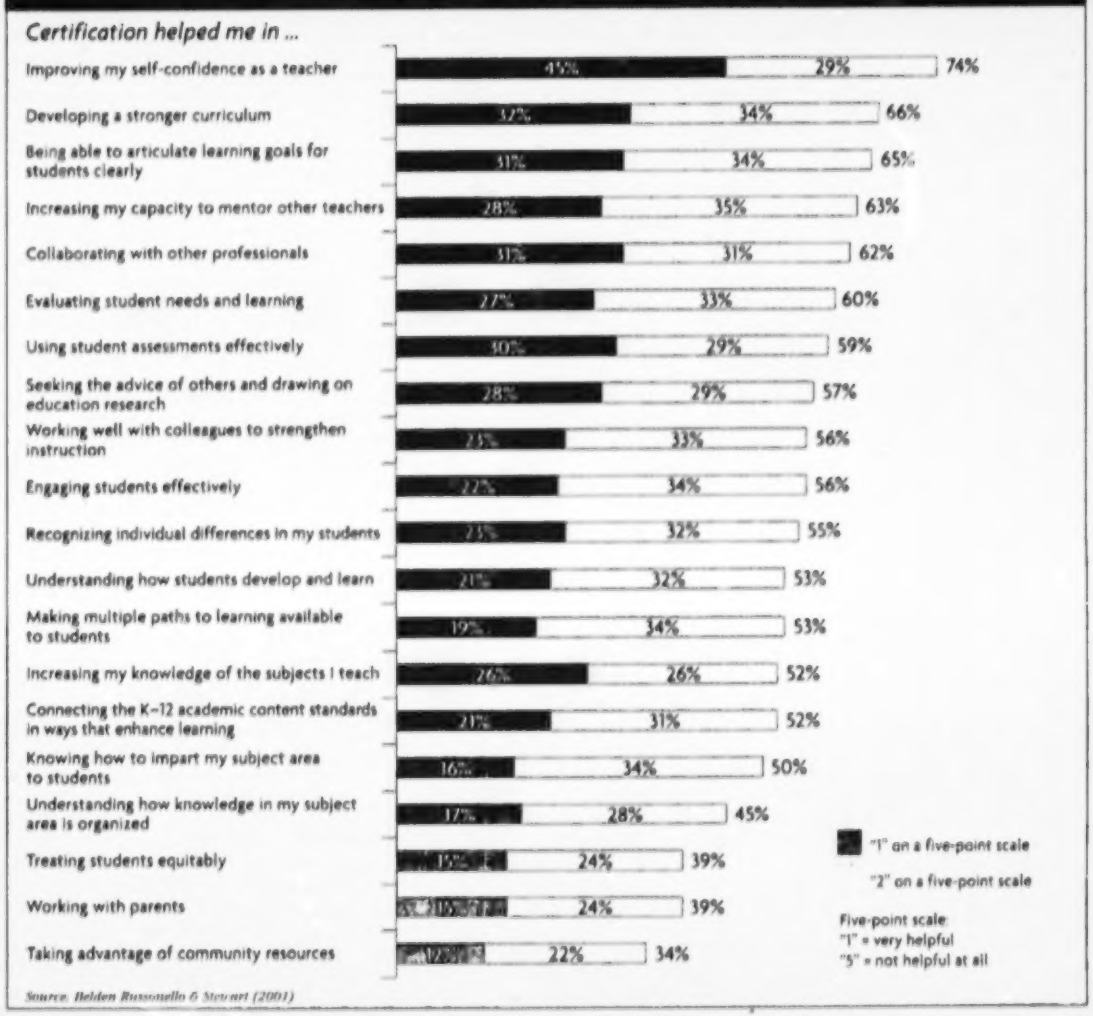
We saw similar findings when we looked inside the outcomes of National Board certification as a tool in teachers' daily work.

We asked teachers to rate the helpfulness of the National Board certification process on 20 distinct aspects. Chart 4 shows those ratings.

Just as they are motivated by the challenge of National Board certification, most of these teachers say that the process boosts their self-confidence. They also say they are now more able to develop stronger curricula and articulate goals clearly for students. But fewer teachers find the process helpful for treating students equitably or working with parents.

There are differences among the teachers. Elementary teachers and women see more utility to the certification process than high school teachers or men do. For example, elementary teachers are far more likely to say the process helped them understand how students develop and learn than high school teachers are. Women and elementary teachers are more likely than men or upper-grade teachers to say the process increased their knowledge of the subjects they teach. And elementary teachers are much more likely than high school teachers to say the process helped them connect how they teach California's academic content standards to enhance student learning.

Chart 4
Certification as a Helpful Professional Tool



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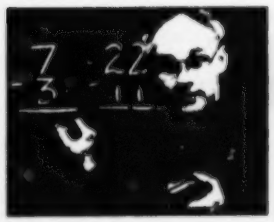
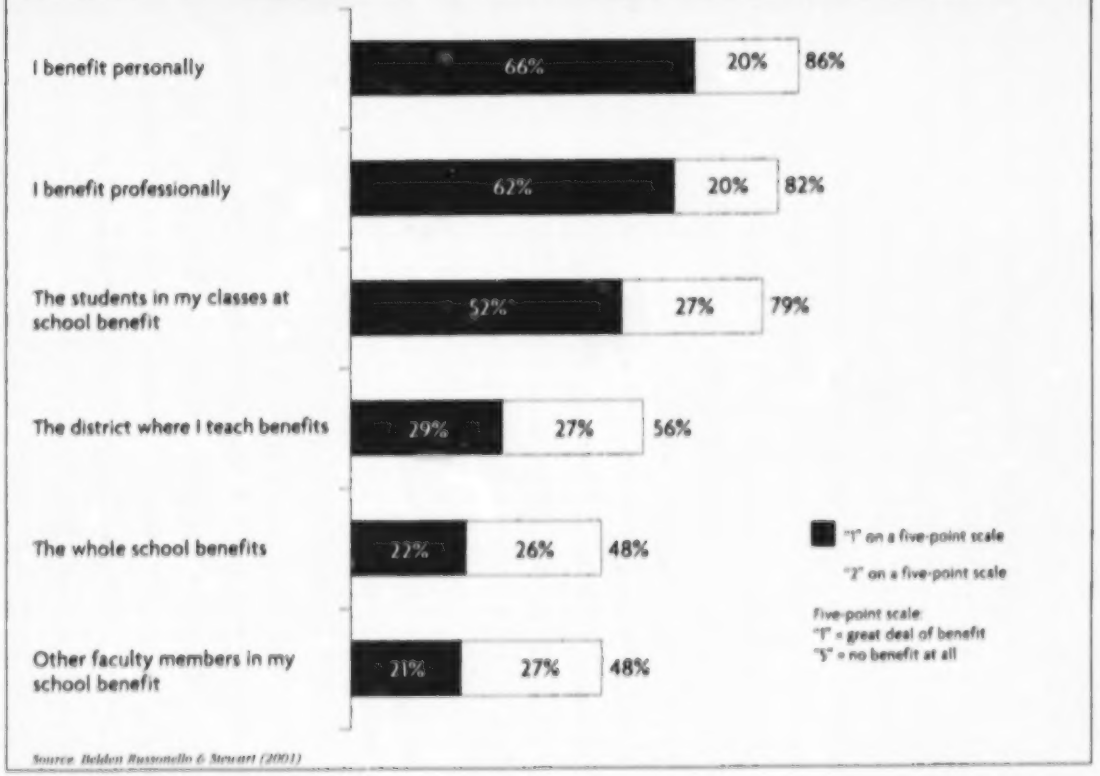


Personal vs. Systemic Benefits

Clearly, most of these teachers feel they personally have benefited from the National Board certification process. It is much less clear that they perceive such benefits for the overall education system.

Chart 5 shows how these teachers responded to the question of who benefits from their National Board certification. There is very little question that most of these teachers see considerable value for themselves in their National Board certification, but less than a third feel that their colleagues, school or school district have benefited.

Chart 5
Who Benefits from National Board Certification?



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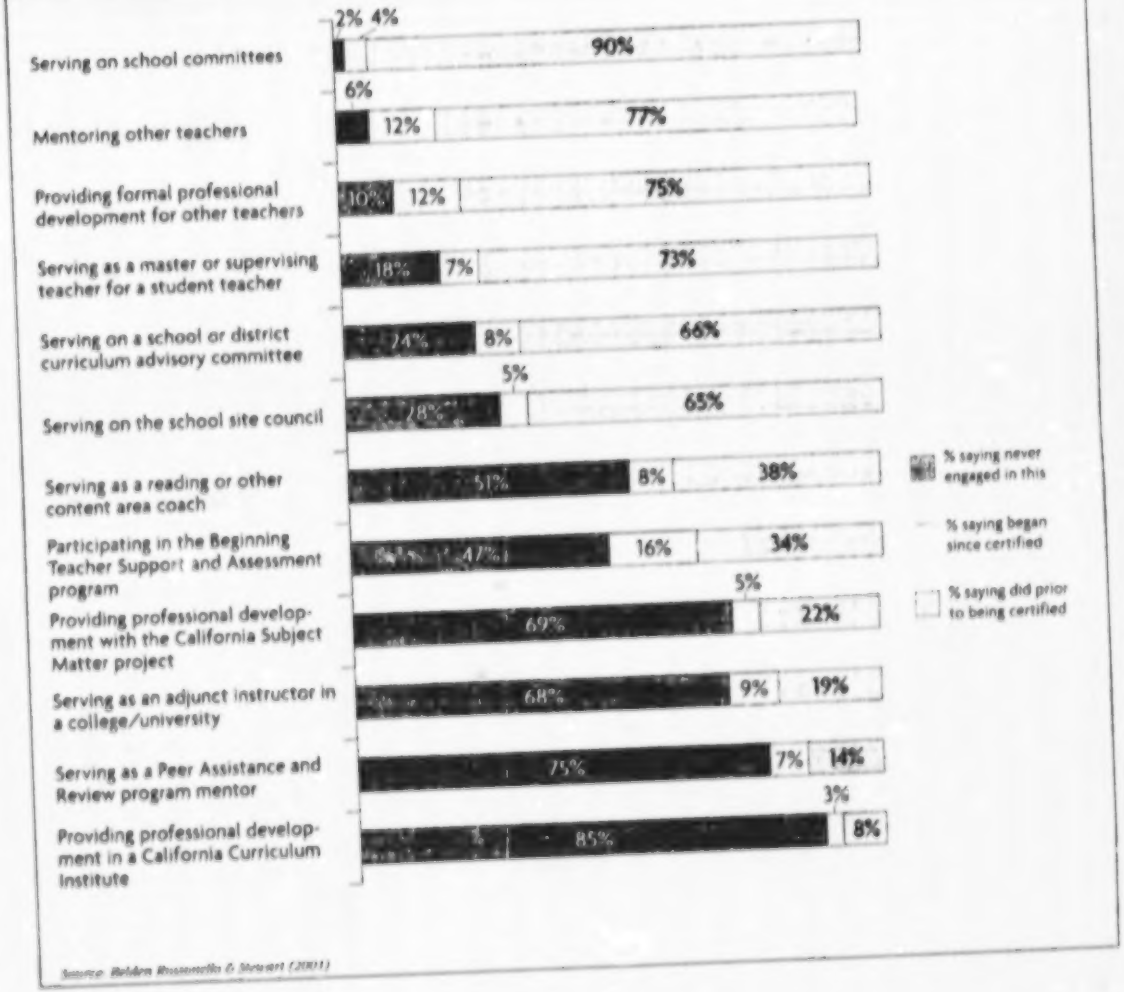
Involvement and Leadership

An overwhelming number of these teachers already were serving in leadership roles before they obtained National Board certification. They see certification as enhancing their leadership abilities, but the process does not necessarily have much influence in creating new leaders.

Chart 6 shows which roles teachers played before becoming certified, which roles they have played since and which roles they have never engaged in. While the chart indicates that most of these teachers have served and are serving in leadership roles within their schools, including mentoring new teachers, few are filling some of the key roles — serving as a reading or subject area coach or working with the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program — that state policymakers have embraced to enhance the profession. Indeed, many of these teachers might be seen as untapped leadership for the state.

Chart 6
Precertification and Postcertification Involvement



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Incentives

Essentially, all teachers surveyed are aware of the financial incentives they can receive if they teach in schools that are considered low performing based on the state's Academic Performance Index. Indeed, half of them already teach in low-performing schools.

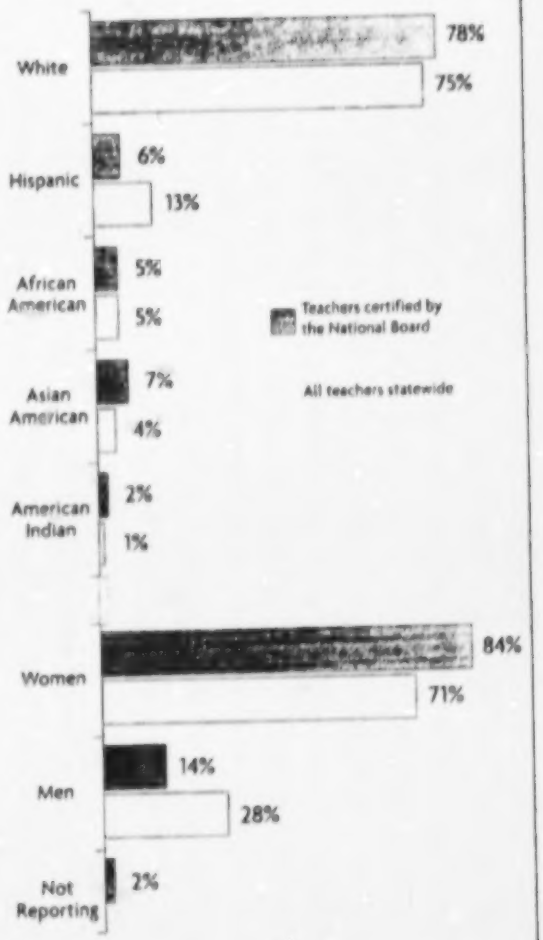
When asked if the incentives would cause them to consider teaching in such a school, three in 10 said that it would. Those teachers most likely to say that it would influence them teach elementary school, teach poor children and teach in urban areas. Those least likely to say that it would influence them include middle or high school teachers; math or science teachers; or teachers in more affluent, suburban schools.

Chart 7
Who Are They?

A little more than half of California teachers who are certified by the National Board teach in elementary schools, about one in five teach in middle or junior high schools, and about one in four teach in high schools. About 85 percent of teachers certified by the National Board are women, although women comprise only about seven in 10 California teachers overall.

The proportions of teachers certified by the National Board generally match the ethnic makeup of the California teaching population with one glaring exception — Hispanic teachers, who comprise about 13 percent of the state's teaching force but only 6 percent of teachers certified by the National Board.

Half of California teachers certified by the National Board work in the bottom half of schools as measured by the Academic Performance Index.



Source: Belden Russonello & Stewart (2001)

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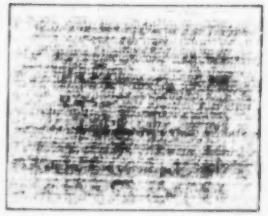
Conclusions and Recommendations



National Board certification holds promise for raising the quality of the teaching profession. California's policymakers should feel that this report justifies the investment the state has made in the process thus far to improve the capacity of the profession to help students reach high standards.

The teachers who were surveyed make it quite clear that they believe the National Board certification process makes them better teachers: More than nine out of 10 consider it excellent or good professional development.

We believe the process represents sound professional development practice — it is focused on subject matter content and student learning, uses teacher self-reflection and inquiry linked to the teacher's own teaching situation and practice, and is highly collaborative. But, as we have previously reported, this kind of thorough, focused professional development is far too rare for most of California's teachers.

Based on what teachers say makes a real difference in their classrooms, the National Board certification process serves as a benchmark for what professional development should look like. We recommend that the Department of Education, the University of California Office of the President and other providers of professional development examine their offerings against this high-end benchmark.

We also recommend that the institutions in California that prepare new teachers coordinate their programs with the National Board certification process.

The survey data show that teachers think they benefit from National Board certification more than their schools or school districts do. But the certification process is relatively new in California. We believe that the state's investment in the National Board will pay greater systemic dividends when there is a critical mass of National Board certified teachers at a school or within the district.

Currently, there are only 1,300 such teachers in the state. Ideally, there should be a cadre of National Board certified teachers in every school, particularly those schools that require the most academic assistance. Therefore, we recommend that the state continue to provide additional incentives to teachers who attempt and earn National Board certification if they serve in the schools with academic performance in the bottom 20 percent of the California Academic Performance Index.

Further, we recommend the creation and funding of more support groups to provide the encouragement and help needed for more teachers in these lowest-performing schools to obtain National Board certification. We also recommend that the state provide site awards to the lowest-performing schools when at least 20 percent of the faculty are participating in the National Board certification process.

The survey found that many National Board certified teachers have active leadership roles in their schools. But it also found that few took on new leadership responsibilities as a result of their certification, and the majority were not engaged in programs the state sees as critical, such as the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program or the Peer Assistance and Review program. We therefore recommend that state leaders work directly with both the National Board and National Board certified teachers to encourage additional participation in key leadership roles.

And finally, we recommend that the state fund an independent organization or agency to continually collect data and issue regular reports to the Governor, Legislature and appropriate education agencies on the value of our investment in National Board certified teachers.

"When people have come to me and asked me about certification, all I have told them is if you really, really want to improve your practice of teaching, this is the way to do it. The self-reflection and your own self-evaluation and self-analysis will make you a better teacher, even if you do not pass."

National Board Certification and California

There are now about 1,300 California teachers who have earned certification by the National Board. Another 1,500 California teachers are working toward certification.

The National Board sets standards and awards certification in 24 areas based on grade level and subject. A teacher who applies for certification must assemble an extensive portfolio of his or her work, much of it video of him or her teaching and samples of student work. The teacher also must pass an examination consisting of a daylong series of essay questions. The process normally takes about a year to complete, and the fee is $2,300.

California policymakers have provided significant incentives to encourage teachers to become certified, including:

- Paying $1,000 of the $2,300 fee. (In addition, Washington Mutual has offered another $1,000 toward this fee for a large number of California teachers, particularly those teaching in the state's lowest-performing schools.)
- Providing a one-time payment of $10,000 to teachers who attain National Board certification.
- Providing an additional $20,000 payment to teachers who agree to teach or who are teaching in low-performing school districts. These schools are defined as the bottom half of schools as measured by the California Academic Performance Index.

In addition, many districts also offer extensive incentives, such as additional salary, to teachers who obtain certification.

Methods

These data are based on a mail-back survey sent in summer 2001 to all California teachers certified by the National Board. The National Board supplied 763 names and addresses of such teachers. Belden Russonello & Stewart mailed questionnaires to these teachers and followed up with teachers who did not respond immediately. A total of 519 completed questionnaires were returned by mid-August for a response rate of 68 percent. The data were compiled in fall 2001, with additional analysis in 2002.

In addition to the survey, a focus group of teachers certified by the National Board was held in Sacramento in June 2001 and moderated by Nancy Belden.

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